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Running head: NARRATIVES IN PROFESSIONAL GOLF

“We Haven’t Got a Seat on the Bus for You” or “All the Seats are Mine”: Narratives and
Career Transition in Professional Golf

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Abstract

In this article we explore how the stories an athlete tells throughout life in sport affect her career transition experiences. We base our enquiry on a social constructionist conception of narrative theory which holds that storytelling is integral to the creation and maintenance of identity and sense of self. Life stories were gathered through interviews with two professional women golfers (Christiana and Kandy) over a six year period. Through a narrative analysis of structure and form we explored each participant's stories of living in and withdrawing from professional golf. We suggest Christiana told monological performance-oriented stories which, while aligning with the culture of elite sport, resulted in an exclusive athletic identity and foreclosure of alternative selves and roles. On withdrawal, Christiana experienced narrative wreckage, identity collapse, mental health difficulties, and considerable psychological trauma. In contrast, Kandy told dialogical discovery-oriented stories which, while being in tension with the dominant performance narrative, created and sustained a multidimensional identity and self. Her stories and identity remained intact, authentic, and continuous on withdrawal from tournament golf and she experienced few psychological problems.

Keywords: identity; narrative; elite sport; women; golf; retirement; career transition

“We Haven’t Got a Seat on the Bus for You” or “All the Seats are Mine”: Narratives and Career Transition in Professional Golf

Smith and Sparkes (2008) present a convincing argument for the potential benefits of narrative approaches to sport and exercise research and argue that narrative enquiry “provides a powerful means of understanding human beings in new, different, and exciting ways” (p. 10). A particular strength of narrative research is its focus on the ways psychological processes are shaped and constrained by the individual’s socio-cultural context. As McLeod (2006) observes, “the concept of narrative provides a bridge between the stories told by specific persons, and the dominant discourses and narratives within which we all collectively live our lives” (p. 207). A further strength is that through studying people’s stories it is possible to gain insights into the ways in which identity and sense of self are created, maintained, or challenged over time. In Smith’s (2007, p. 391) terms, “narratives are important in the process of constructing selves and identities” because “people understand themselves as selves through the stories they tell and the stories they feel part of.”

Focussing on the ways in which identity is narratively shaped over time by psychological and socio-cultural factors promises valuable insights into the processes of career transition in sport. Research suggests that withdrawal from sport can have powerful and profound effects on identity, sense of self, and psychological well-being (Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2001; Sparkes, 1998; Webb, Nasco, Riley, & Headrick, 1998). McKenna and Thomas (2007) suggest withdrawal be understood as a transitional process as opposed to a one-off event and, from this perspective, the ways career transition affects an individual is best understood in light of earlier events in her or his life, the personal meaning of sport, and the potential impact of co-occurring transitions.

Our purpose in this article is to explore relationships between narrative, identity, and personal experiences of career transition in the stories of two professional golfers. Drawing on

life history interviews conducted over a six year period, we seek to understand how the dominant narrative in elite sport – a performance narrative (see Douglas & Carless, 2006, 2008, in press) – shaped, constrained, or otherwise affected identity and transition experiences. Our study is premised on the belief that “the core of our identity is really a narrative thread that gives meaning to life provided – and this is the big if – that it is never broken” (Spence, 1982, p. 458). Implicit therefore is the idea that stories, identity, experience, and psychological health are inter-related and influenced by biographical, historical, and socio-cultural factors.

Method

Participants

Christiana and Kandy (both pseudonyms) were highly successful professional tournament golfers. Both were introduced to golf by a parent and later enrolled in formal lessons. Both competed internationally, winning major amateur events before going on to win multiple events on the professional tour. Prior to withdrawal, both women made a formal announcement of their intention to retire and newspapers across Europe reported their retirement as a natural age-related end to a successful career as opposed to premature drop-out. As such, Christiana and Kandy were publicly recognised as having had successful golf careers.

Procedures

The research received ethical approval from the NHS Healthcare Trust Research Ethics Committee. The lead researcher (Kitrina) knew both players through her role as tour player, board member, and player representative on the tour council. On the basis of this relationship, Kitrina invited both women to take part in her study of motivation and persistence among women professional tournament golfers (Douglas, 2004) which began in 2001. Both women agreed and provided informed consent.

Each interview commenced with the *grand tour* question (Wolcott, 1994) which invited the participant to provide an account of her life. During these interviews Kitrina adopted the position of active and empathic listener encouraging each participant to tell her story in her own words and offering prompts to clarify meaning and to gain depth. Interviews were tape-recorded and professionally transcribed verbatim before being sent to participants for comments and to verify it as an accurate record of the interaction.

Kitrina conducted follow-up interviews with Kandy in 2003 and 2005 and with Christiana in 2003, 2005, 2006, and 2007. These were supplemented with telephone interviews and informal conversations, accounts of which Kitrina recorded in her reflexive diary. Follow-up interviews focussed on events in each participant's life at the current time, the causes and meaning of these events, and each woman's hopes for the future. Finally, both women took part in a feedback sessions when they were asked whether any issues had been omitted or misrepresented. All interviews were conducted in English, which both participants spoke fluently.

Analysis

Both researchers read the interview transcripts to become immersed in the data before conducting a content analysis. Next, we conducted a *narrative analysis of structure and form* in recognition that "the formal aspects of structure, as much as the content, express the identity, perceptions, and values of the storyteller" (Sparkes, 2005, p. 195). In Smith and Sparkes' (2006) terms, we assumed the role of *story analysts* to link the participants' stories with relevant theoretical constructs. Through the theoretical lens of a social constructionist conception of narrative theory (McLeod, 1997), we now present our analysis of Christiana and Kandy's stories in three sections: (a) *narrative construction of self*, which explores how each woman's identity was shaped by personal and cultural stories in sport; (b) *negotiating narrative alignment*, which focuses on the psychological and emotional consequences of these stories, and (c) *consequences of narratives*, which explores how each woman's stories related

to her post-retirement experiences. In keeping with the philosophical underpinnings of the interpretive paradigm, our aim is to illuminate rather than finalise the complex ways in which narrative, identity, and psychological well-being interact in the context of professional sport.

Narrative Construction of Self

One's sense of self can be seen as a narrative achievement ... people are seen as constructing meaning of their life experiences by punctuating the seamless flow of events and organizing them according to recurrent themes ... which in turn scaffold the 'plot' of one's life story, and confer on it a modicum of consistency over time. (Neimeyer, Herrero, & Botella, 2006, p. 128-9)

There is growing awareness that self and identity are, in part at least, constituted through narrative. Social constructionist thinkers, such as McLeod (1997), argue that "the 'self' is not experienced as a static 'entity' but a process of becoming" and that, from this perspective, "the self-concept requires a narrative structure, since this is the only way in which events over time can be integrated into a cohesive identity" (p. 44). According to Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach and Zilber (1998), "the story *is* one's identity, a story created, told, revised, and retold throughout life" (p. 7). As Neimeyer and colleagues (2006) suggest, creating and telling stories of one's life is a necessary task if a person is to make meaning of her or his disparate experiences.

While stories relate to personal experience they are at the same time shaped by socio-cultural conventions. According to McLeod (1997), "even when a teller is recounting a unique set of individual, personal events, he or she can only do so by drawing upon story structures and genres drawn from the narrative resources of a culture" (p. 94). In this way, Frank (1995) reminds us, a person's own story is shaped and constrained by dominant narratives that circulate within her or his culture. Because stories shape identity, people can be understood as active agents in creating their identity and sense of self within the confines of their particular socio-cultural context. With these points in mind, we now consider how each

participant created, through narrative means, an identity and sense of self in the context of elite sport.

Christiana: "It was everything to me"

Christiana's life story is characteristic of what we have previously described as the dominant narrative type in sport: a performance narrative (Douglas & Carless, 2006). This type of story is one where being competitive is storied as 'natural,' where winning is prioritised to the extent that discipline, sacrifice and pain are accepted in the pursuit of glory, and failure is accompanied by feelings of shame. In looking to the future, the performance narrative stories life without sport as loss. Such is the dominance of this type of story it often becomes totalitarian to the extent that performance stories are expected of *all* athletes. In what follows, we focus on the ways Christiana's stories align with this narrative type and thereby shape a particular kind of identity.

Christiana's stories of her childhood place great importance on competition and being competitive. That is, even stories of her earliest sport involvement portray a strong commitment to the values of the performance narrative. The following extract provides an example:

I just loved sport, any sport. You introduce me to any sport and I'll have a go, I just like competition, I was very competitive. Part of my motivation was to succeed at something, or to be good at something, because I wasn't good at anything else. One of my biggest problems is lacking belief in myself, I think that's been an ongoing problem since I was at school, low self-esteem because I was told I was useless at everything, except my sport. I didn't do very well in exams so, everyone is result orientated, if you don't produce the results it's a failure. The fact that I was good at something boosts your confidence.

In this excerpt Christiana describes a strong link between success in sport and a positive sense of self. The importance winning held for Christiana was likely increased as a result of her perceived lack of success in other areas of life. In stories of her childhood years, sport was

portrayed as the *only* activity in which Christiana achieved success and, thus, the *only* avenue through which she was able to develop a positive sense of self-worth.

Also apparent in this excerpt is how, in noting that “everyone is result orientated” and not producing is “failure,” Christiana begins to indicate the type of culture in which she was immersed as a child and expresses a perception that there is no alternative *but* to be “result oriented” if one is to avoid “failure”. These words indicate how performance values begin to be prioritised along with the totalitarianism perspective that “the performance narrative is the *only* route to success for *all* professional women golfers” (Douglas & Carless, 2006, p. 21).

Christiana storied her progress through the amateur game and into the professional ranks as “natural” and a result of her “hunger” for further competition and success. Her stories of smooth progression in sport contrasted with the difficulties she described in other areas of life where she recalls being told she was “useless”. By including little or no talk of alternative roles, identities, interests or activities beyond those that related directly to improving performance, we suggest Christiana’s stories contributed to the creation of an athlete identity. In other words, her sense of self came to be almost exclusively constituted in and through performance-related talk. Significantly, the identity Christiana constructed through these stories wasn’t just *any* golfer but a very specific kind of golfer: a player at the top of the professional game. Thus, identity and sense of self was tenuous and dependent on continued success on the professional tour. In short, golf was, as Christiana later put it, “everything to me.”

Kandy: “I never felt better because I won a tournament”

The type of stories Kandy told of her life – and consequently the self and identity she created – differ markedly from those of Christiana to follow instead the contours of what we have previously termed a discovery narrative (Douglas & Carless, 2006). Several characteristics of a discovery narrative are evident in the following excerpt:

When I was a kid in my mind it was not important to be the first, second or third. The important thing was to have a good time. When I was an amateur and I started to be good and win, when I was about 15, 16, 17 it was good but it was not that important. It was nice because you go away for a week or for four days, you are in another world, it's a trip. It is like "Oh that's nice!" So you are going to see new people, discover new towns, new food, the hotel, you know, a different bed! Everything is very exciting.

Evident above are the ways what is important to Kandy is linked with excitement, discovering travel and food as opposed to competition and winning trophies which are at the heart of Christiana's stories. As we see it, Kandy actively transgresses culturally preferred performance stories in favour of a discovery orientation. This is further illustrated in the following exchange where Kandy explicitly resists the performance narrative definition of 'success' (winning tournaments) to create a personally meaningful criterion of 'success':

Kitrina: How important was it for you to be successful at golf? How would you describe it?

Kandy: Successful for me is if you have a goal and you want to reach it, and if you reach it, you are successful. Not because you win a lot of money or because you win 2 or 22 tournaments. It is because if in your mind you want to realise a red square, if you have blue triangle, well, it is not really the same. But if, because of your work or because of your interest or because of your sacrifice or because a lot of different things, you reach the red square, you are successful.

Kitrina: Was it important for you to reach the red square?

Kandy: Yes. Because I was brought up and educated to have a goal and to reach a goal. That's my mother's type of dedication and she always said you are born to play golf, you are born sporty, you are born to be a good player, and you *have* to do it.

Kitrina: Did you believe that?

Kandy: No. I thought, well no, at that time I thought I don't care. I don't mind. For me it was not the goal. The goal was to play good golf, to escape, and to go out and to discover other worlds. That was my red square.

Here, Kandy articulates a way of being that differs dramatically from the performance narrative which stories wins and tournament success as the overriding priority. In doing so, she thereby contravenes the expectations of others (e.g., her mother) who buy into the performance story and creates an alternative story (her "red square") through which to evaluate her life.

This is not to say that Kandy did not work hard at her golf. But, critically, her stories locate performance within the broader context of her life rather than being, as is the case with Christiana, the overriding priority of life. Two examples should clarify this distinction. First, Kandy stories her motivation for golf as based upon the belief that being successful would improve the conditions of her life. As she put it, "if I was working in golf and was good I could discover more, and to discover was interesting for me. So...I had to work at golf." Thus, golf was a "conduit" for other things, rather the central *purpose* of her life. Second, as a consequence, Kandy's sense of self and identity were not storied as being dependent on her golf performance. As Kandy put it, "The day I played badly, or the tournaments I played badly, it was not like, I am not good enough or I am bad. No! ... I never felt better because I won a tournament." At no time did Kandy tell stories which linked feeling good about herself – gaining confidence or self-worth – with beating opponents or winning tournaments.

Instead of focussing exclusively on golf performance, Kandy's stories evoke and prioritise a multidimensional life – in terms of interests, roles, an identity, a sense of self – *outside* golf. One example of this is her decision to give up her golf scholarship in the USA so she could move to Europe to marry. Another example was her decision to have a baby: "I decided I had to be a mother because I always thought for me to have a kid was very important. Turning professional was a job and that job was because I had my daughter." Here

Kandy once again tells a story at odds with the performance narrative. Significantly, the discovery stories that underpinned Kandy's life *in* golf – being *life* stories rather than a *performance* stories – held the potential to be projected into her future life after golf bringing the possibility of narrative continuity rather than disjuncture.

In storying her experiences this way, Kandy articulates an alternative route to success in professional golf. In the context of her success, the existence of Kandy's discovery narrative proves the falsity of the totalitarian belief espoused by tellers of performance stories that the performance script is the *only* way to achieve success in elite sport. Because Kandy achieved considerable success in terms of tournament wins, yet storied her life in an alternative fashion, her narrative represents a direct challenge to those who insist on an exclusive adherence to performance values in the effort to achieve sporting success. In telling this alternative and provocative story, Kandy created and sustained an identity that, while *including* golf, did not *prioritise* golf. For her, the identity of 'being a golfer' was merely one part of a complex and rich self which incorporated other identities, roles, and activities throughout her career.

Negotiating Narrative Alignment

The stories that, for the most part, construct our lives are 'out there', they exist before we are born and continue after we die. The task of being a person in a culture involves creating a satisfactory-enough alignment between individual experience and 'the story of which I find myself a part'. (McLeod, 1997, p. 27)

This quotation draws attention to the importance of achieving some kind of "alignment" between personal experience and the more general narratives which circulate within an individual's culture. It is primarily through telling, sharing, and refining personal stories that this process takes place. Narrative theorists suggest that the stakes in this task are high as success is associated with personal development and adaptation while failure can lead to stagnation and mental health problems (Crossley, 2000; McAdams, 1993). The negotiation

of narrative alignment is, however, rarely an easy task. According to Neimeyer et al. (2006), “any given life is at the intersection of many competing group memberships and (sub)cultural matrixes, the resulting identity options are virtually guaranteed to be multiplistic and contradictory, and the narrated self socially ‘saturated’ and less than fully coherent” (p. 130). From this perspective, it is likely that even if a person successfully negotiates narrative alignment within one particular cultural setting, tensions will emerge when they move into an alternative cultural setting. Put simply, the alignment between cultural context and one’s experience may be challenged when *either* cultural context *or* personal experience change.

McLeod (2006) argues that “identity or subjectivity can be understood in terms of how we position ourselves, or are positioned by others, in relation to these discourses or dominant narratives” (p. 205). Therefore, individuals are either positioned *by* dominant cultural narratives or, alternatively, must proactively create personal stories which enable a different, more personally satisfactory positioning or alignment to be achieved. With this point in mind, we now explore Christiana and Kandy’s attempts to negotiate a satisfactory narrative alignment in the context of the dominant performance narrative.

Christiana: “You used to shoot good scores, what’s happened to you?”

For much of her career Christiana is able to achieve a “satisfactory-enough alignment” between her experiences and the story of which she finds herself a part (the performance narrative) through telling performance stories. She is, however, only able to maintain this alignment *provided* she continues to win *and* dedicate her life to golf. When both these conditions are met, Christiana’s stories – alongside her sense of self and identity – are relatively coherent and culturally endorsed resulting in narrative ‘fit’ and psychological well-being. Problems occur, however, when there is a change in either her lived experience of performance (i.e. results) *or* the culture in which she is immersed (i.e., life outside golf). At these times, her changing circumstances begin to fall out of alignment with her personal performance story and narrative tensions become evident.

The consequences of these narrative tensions are illustrated in this excerpt:

You're always thinking about yourself and golf and how you are doing. I find it very difficult to laugh on the golf course. I am a miserable cow on the golf course, too consumed. It was everything to me. Yeah. There is no question. I was miserable if I didn't play how I wanted to. I suppose the fact that I was good at something, boosts your confidence and then [you] go on such an up and down imaginary roller coaster, in terms of, you know, whether you are successful or not. I can't seem to cope with not doing well.

Revealed here are some of the emotional and psychological costs which Christiana experienced during periods of poor form. From a narrative perspective, Christiana's emotional ups and downs can be understood as a consequence of a lack of alignment between her performance story (which demands tournament wins) and her objective experience of poor form and disappointing results. Previously, when Christiana described success at the amateur and professional level she told of positive effects on the self in terms of self-esteem and confidence. At these times, her experiences aligned closely with the ideals of the performance narrative and, we suggest, she experienced harmony. When she fails to perform, however, her experience *does not* align with the performance story. The result: narrative discord and a degree of emotional suffering.

It is significant that the emotions Christiana experienced during such periods are not only a result of her own stories. Christiana reveals that a degree of emotional suffering resulted from being immersed in a culture where the expectations of *others* (who also align with the dominant performance narrative) influenced her.

Mum couldn't quite understand why I wasn't shooting good scores, she said "You used to shoot good scores, what's happened to you?" ... You're not that bothered about it yourself, but suddenly, you *do* become bothered about it because it's been put in your mind. And it's the same with your fans. It's the first thing they say, it's not "How are you?" it's "What did you shoot today?" And you get into that syndrome because of other

people. It's not necessarily something you think yourself but that influence is forced upon you. And you start thinking about yourself and then you get upset with yourself.

Here Christiana describes being emotionally affected when her experience (her golf performance) fails to align with (live up to) others' performance stories. Christiana shows that while she is at times able to reconcile this difference in herself, she exists within and is constrained by a sport culture where continued adherence to the performance narrative by family and fans perpetuates narrative tensions.

The extent of Christiana's commitment to the performance narrative is underscored when she considers her life after tournament golf. Four years before retiring she stated: "I think I can still be competitive, got a couple of goals still left that I want to achieve. I think as long as I feel, as long as I am competitive I would like to stay out here." Two years later:

I just love competing. Last week I came second, it was obviously disappointing in that I wanted to win, but it was fun, I enjoyed being up there again, it was just fun to be able to compete. I still like competing and I want to go out of it on a high.

These excerpts illustrate how Christiana told, and continued to tell, performance stories throughout her career. Despite failing to meet the terms of the performance narrative – i.e., not winning – she did *not* modify her personal story through adopting an alternative narrative template. In sticking rigidly to a performance story, Christiana had little in the way of a future orientation outside this narrative type. As a result, she experienced what Freeman (2003) terms *identity foreclosure* through self-narrowing, self-erosion, and a loss of multidimensionality and potential future selves.

This process is illustrated in the following excerpt:

Christiana: I think the fact that I haven't been married or I haven't had any relationships or stuff like that, you know, that is something that I will always wonder about, whether I failed at.

Kitrina: Would like to have a family, children?

Christiana: Oh, I would have done but obviously I have had to sacrifice that. It's history. I am not sure I could cope with it now, you know, that is something, as a woman, you yearn for that. I don't know whether that's innate or being a woman [pause]

Kitrina: What about getting married?

Christiana: The same. Sometimes I think, yeah, I would love to, and then other times I think, no, I am not, I'm not made out to be married, you know. So my emotions go up and down, not particularly constant.

It is informative that, in responding to Kitrina's present tense question of whether she would like to have a family, Christiana replies in the past tense. Here, Christiana has finalised her own life: she believes it is too late for her to have children and she is "not made out to be married." Importantly, by saying that having a family is something she has "obviously" had to "sacrifice," Christiana sustains the view that 'being a mother' and 'being an elite athlete' are fundamentally incompatible. For her, in common with many female athletes, having a family *and* performing at the highest level in sport appear mutually exclusive choices. Christiana articulates the emotional costs of the conflict between what is expected of her as an athlete and what she feels is "innate" as a woman. Within the sport culture few (if any) question her sacrifice yet in contemplating life outside professional sport she is unable to articulate a satisfactory alternative story.

Kandy: "I am the owner of my life"

In contrast, Kandy's discovery stories *did not* align with the dominant performance narrative and tensions were apparent in golf contexts. The following excerpt portrays this lack of alignment between her story and the storied expectations of "people" and "the press":

I know people were expecting, the press, people, but in my mind golf was not a priority. 'You have to play well because they expect and have an image.' No! Golf was important because it was money and education for my daughter.

As opposed to Christiana who seems to have acquiesced to others' tellings of performance stories, Kandy is determined to stick with her own story: she explicitly says "No!" to the pressure to conform to performance values. This is evident throughout Kandy's narrative as this account of her decision not to return to the USA for a golf scholarship reveals:

I said to my Mum, "I don't want to study anymore, I want to go to Denmark and I want to marry." Oh! It was like a disaster. It was not what I was supposed to do. But I said, "I don't mind, I am 19." And I took the suitcase and I took my car and I drove to Copenhagen and I just left. And I said "I am sorry but I am the owner of my life."

Explicit here is the way others could not accept Kandy's transgression of the dominant narrative (which stories performance over relationships). As is the case in Christiana's stories, Kandy's stories show how others expect her to act in ways that align with the performance narrative. However, the plot of Kandy's story is characterised by her continued resistance to these attempts through the maintenance of alternative stories. We suggest that Kandy is able to resist and re-story her mother's reaction (which stories Kandy's plans as "a disaster" and "not what I was supposed to do") by relying on the sense of self that was previously constructed through telling and re-telling stories which value exploration and discovery.

The general absence of alternatives to performance stories in sport culture is further illustrated when Kandy describes a lack of interest within golf of her life outside sport: "No-one ever asked about my daughter or how I was coping. The media only wanted good news. My problems did not interest them at all." As a result, Kandy did not feel able to voice her "red square" in public arenas. The following is an example of one untold story:

Lucy was small and it is very tough to go away, nights were very hard, you know, when you are back alone at the hotel and you know that you've got the kid at home. The first two or three years, really, really tough [*pause*]. You are alone, crying, depressed, thinking 'Fucking golf!' and 'Fucking everything!' ... Then there is a time after you've cried – you need to be like that, you need to cry, to express everything – then, you think, yes but you

are here and you are the one and you have to do it and you are strong enough: do it ... shut up and do it. Yes. Just like this. You go out on the course, and you hit that ball and you do it.

In this excerpt Kandy shares a personal story which others are unwilling to hear. Critically however, by continuing to tell these silenced stories to herself, Kandy was able to maintain her personal (discovery) narrative in the face of its rejection by others. By saying “golf was important because it was money and education for my daughter” Kandy positioned herself as ‘a mother’ before ‘a golfer.’ We suggest Kandy thereby achieved a high degree of narrative alignment *not* with the dominant performance narrative of sport but the culturally endorsed narrative of motherhood which focuses on caring and providing for one’s child.

Through storying her life along the lines of a discovery narrative Kandy was able to achieve a high degree of narrative authenticity, continuity, and coherence. Though not without emotional difficulties, Kandy’s stories fit with the way she lives her life, they remain consistent across her career, and they allow her to make sense of her sometimes difficult experiences in golf. Thus, although Kandy experiences narrative tensions and a degree of emotional trauma *within* golf (because her story does not align with cultural expectations within sport), *outside* golf she experiences a high degree of narrative alignment and relative psychological well-being.

Consequences of Narratives

It is significant that the risk of narrative disruption (and, consequently, identity trouble) is increased at times of change. As Neimeyer and colleagues (2006) suggest: “Dramatic life events, and especially those of a traumatic kind, have the potential to introduce experiences that are not only radically incoherent with the plot of a person’s prior life narrative, but that invalidate its core emotional themes and goals as well” (p. 131). As we show in what follows, this was very much the case for Christiana who experienced significant emotional and psychological trauma following withdrawal from tournament golf.

Christiana: “We haven’t got a seat on the bus for you”

Soon after officially retiring Christiana began to experience psychological difficulties:

I think there were two things missing: the buzzing excitement of walking up the last, I suppose adulation, the crowds, and then there was “what am I going to do next?” That hit me all at once. I’m thinking what am I going to do? Suddenly, you lose your confidence and think, well, I’m no good at anything. I was depressed. And then you start to question whether you made the right choice, why am I here? What am I going to do?

Two key issues are raised here. First, Christiana identifies “missing” the glorified athletic self which characterises her earlier stories. Because golf had, from her teenage years, been *the* thing upon which her identity and confidence depended it is hardly surprising that its loss led her to question her worth and lose confidence in more general life contexts. A second issue concerns the consequences of these changes on Christiana: she became depressed.

In the months following withdrawal Christiana described fluctuating between episodes of depression and periods of more positive psychological health. In the following excerpt she explores these emotions:

I loved being on a stage, performing. But what I’m saying is that when I saw somebody walking up the 18th and it wasn’t me, those memories came back to me again. There was a programme on television about former athletes and how they missed the buzz of going into a stadium with 50,000 there and they said you’d never replace that. Other people were saying to me that you’d find something else that gives you that buzz. I said, well, I don’t know if I can, it wouldn’t be the same you know, it’s not the same type of buzz, digging potatoes up, it’s not, you can’t connect the two.

In addition to emphasising the centrality of a glorified athletic identity, this excerpt also reveals how Christiana’s stories of retirement as “loss” were reinforced by the media and other sports people whose words re-inscribed the dominant performance narrative. That is, no alternative narrative types were available to provide the resources with which to construct a

different self. In Christiana's stories, the (glorified athletic) identity she developed through her life in sport simply could not be replaced. In her stories, *anything* else is portrayed as a poor second.

Over the coming months the gap between the gloried self, and what she was experiencing post retirement, continued to widen. Christiana described a continuing deterioration in her mental health as a string of possible work opportunities failed. After repeated disappointments she remarked:

People don't want to touch me. That's what I've found. They talk about a seat on a bus, the trouble is we haven't got a seat for you. We think you're valuable but we don't know what at. So, you know, I don't get anywhere. What hit me was, I'm valuable, but what are my skills? I didn't have any qualifications. We haven't got a seat on the bus for you.

These troubling circumstances, we suggest, served to reinforce Christiana's commitment to the only story by which she has ever achieved a positive sense of self: a performance narrative. She asks herself "if I have made the right choice" in retiring and wonders if she should have stayed in golf. In so doing, Christiana increasingly focuses her present and future stories on the past, a strategy which, according to Crossley (2000), is a dangerous one because an inability to imagine or plan for a future can have damaging effects on the individual. In Crossley's terms, "such an occupation with the past to the detriment of the future rapidly deteriorates into a loss of sense of meaning in life and subsequent mental and physical decay" (p.151).

Six months after the interview from which the preceding excerpt was drawn, Kitrina received a text message on her mobile phone which read: "please don't call me I can't talk, I sent you an e-mail. Please read it and decide what you want to do x Christiana". The message was a request from Christiana, a pleading for help, as her mental health deteriorated to the point that she became severely unwell. During their meeting, Christiana declined Kitrina's request that she seek professional help. Six months later, Christiana once again contacted

Kitrina, this time in desperation. At this time she agreed to seek professional help. At the time of writing, Christiana is receiving counselling.

Kandy: "All the seats are mine and I go with the bus wherever I want"

Four years before retiring, Kandy had started to consider what she might do following her withdrawal from professional golf:

A lot of players they think "what shall I do later on?" I don't have that problem because, even if I can't be sure 100%, I am quite convinced when I retire I will play golf for my pleasure but I won't work in golf. I am going to build a house – it is a lot of work. I want to learn to play the guitar. I want to learn Russian. I love gardening. I'll have a big garden. I want to have my dog. I want to go and bicycle with my dog and I want to do many things and I want to travel and Peter is the same. We want to travel and discover the countries we don't know because we don't know the food, we don't know – and probably in my mind it is like, "Oh my goodness!" I want to have time to do all these things.

Entirely absent from this prospective view of retirement is any talk about loss. Instead, Kandy sounds positive – *excited* even – about her future after golf. This story is wholly consistent with the terms of a discovery narrative and is reminiscent of Kandy's stories of her childhood involvement in sport. Since winning, competition, and glory did not underpin her sense of self at any stage of her life, there is no reason why she should fear their impending loss. Instead, Kandy resists the terms of the performance narrative by drawing on the alternative stories (and identity) she has created throughout her life which looked to a broad range of factors (for example, travel, relationships, her home and garden) to bring interest, excitement, and meaning to her life. As the following excerpt shows, while Kandy seems aware of the 'retirement as loss' story of the performance narrative, eighteen months after retirement she had no doubts about whether retirement had been right for her:

I thought, when I retired, I am pretty sure 200% I am not going to miss golf, competition. But maybe, I thought, after the excitement is gone maybe life is going to be boring

because when you have that kind of life you never stop, you're never at home. So I thought maybe being home, you know, the quiet life, normal life, I wasn't sure after the excitement is gone. But no, no, no, no! The excitement is still there, every day, you know. I wake up and I am so happy to have the life I have ... I never want to be back and play! Never!

It is evident that Kandy's discovery stories, which tell of her earliest involvement in sport through to post retirement, display a high degree of consistency, agency, and coherence. She *never* tells performance stories in which winning, success, and competition are prioritised over and above other activities, roles, and goals. Instead, Kandy progresses a story which remains focussed on experiencing life in the fullest sense, of discovering new experiences, of making the most of *now*. Kandy's experiences exemplify Spence's (1982, p. 458) point that "the core of our identity is really a narrative thread that gives meaning to life." Critically, sustaining this narrative thread necessitated her *resisting* and *rejecting* the dominant performance narrative. During Kandy's final interview, Kitrina spoke anonymously about Christiana's perception that, for her, there were "no seats on the bus". Kandy's response is revealing: "For me, all the seats are mine and I go with the bus wherever I want." We suggest that while Kandy was able to sustain a discovery-oriented narrative thread which gave meaning to her life throughout her golf career and after her retirement, Christiana's almost exclusively performance-oriented narrative thread was lost when she retired from professional golf.

Dialogical and Monological Stories

Christiana and Kandy's stories provide rich accounts of their experiences of living in and withdrawing from professional tournament golf. But what can we take from these stories? We would like to consider these questions in the light of recent narrative theory concerning the way self and identity are conceived as dialogically constructed. Lysaker and Lysaker (2006) write that dialogical models of the self, "conceptualize the self and its many narratives

as the products of ongoing conversations both within the individual and between individuals” (p. 59). For these authors, “coherent self-awareness does not come from a solitary single voice or seamless viewpoint, but emerges out of a collective of complementary, competing and contradictory voices or self-positions” (Lysaker & Lysaker, 2002, p. 209). In Hermans’ (2006, p. 149-150) terms, “the dialogical self functions as a ‘society of mind’ ... with tensions, conflicts, and contradictions as intrinsic features of a (healthy functioning) self.”

We consider that Kandy’s stories exemplify a healthy, functioning, dialogical self. Kandy storied her life from multiple perspectives or self-positions (e.g., “mother, wife, myself”) according to her various roles, responsibilities, and activities. It is self-evident that maintenance of more than one self-position is a prerequisite for dialogue *between* different self-positions. Establishing and maintaining diverse self-positions allowed Kandy to engage in the ongoing dialogues which are described in her stories as conversations she ‘had with herself’. Through this process, we suggest Kandy developed a resilient multidimensional self which allowed a sense of personal depth, coherent self-awareness, authenticity, and positive mental well-being during her golf career and following her retirement.

Lysaker and Lysaker (2002) describe two ways in which a dialogical narrative can be compromised. First, they suggest that “an absence of a temporary hierarchy among self-positions could result in an inability to order internal dialogue” (p. 211). Here, not only is there a need for alternative self-positions to *exist*, but some kind of relative prioritising of the different positions is also necessary. Second, they suggest that “a failure of an existing hierarchical order of self-positions routinely to shift or reorder could, in effect, deny certain self-positions their chance to speak” (p. 211). Here it is suggested that changing life circumstances can necessitate a revision of one’s relative prioritisation of self-positions to allow alternative voices to be heard. Failure with regards either of these points can result in a *monological* narrative which is,

distinguished by a strong but rigid hierarchy of self-positions with one or a few positions dominating the repertoire. In this type of narrative the dialogical capacity is seriously reduced and results in a monologue that orders the world in a consistent but singular manner. There may be multiple experiences but all of these are interpreted according to unchanging self-positions ... persons who are in a monological state construct an internally consistent story, but one so rigid that it would resist any evolution. (Hermans, 2006, p. 152)

In contrast to Kandy's dialogical stories, Christiana's stories tend to be monological in that they are told from a single fixed self-position: that of 'professional golfer'. Consequently, Christiana was unable to engage in the dialogical conversations which are necessary to create or sustain a healthy sense of self. Once Christiana was no longer a professional golfer her monological performance story could no longer 'work.' In light of the social constructionist view that identity and sense of self is constituted through stories (e.g., McLeod, 1997), the collapse of Christiana's life story on retirement can be equated to a collapse of her sense of self and identity. Frank (1995) has termed this devastating process *narrative wreckage* and linked it to the occurrence of psychological and emotional trauma and suffering.

Crucially, we see Christiana's monological stories as powerfully shaped and constrained by a dominant performance narrative which is itself monological. That is, in the performance narrative the role of 'golfer' is storied not only *above* all other possible identities, roles, and selves, but at times to their *exclusion*. Kandy's dialogical discovery narrative resists, contravenes, and challenges the dominant narrative, inevitably resulting in tensions, personal difficulties, and emotional costs. In this light it should not be surprising that many sportspeople, Christiana included, are unable to avoid storying their life around the contours of a performance narrative. Individual athletes cannot be held solely responsible for this, in our view, more or less the entire fabric and culture of elite sport – from parents, coaches, and fans to the media and other athletes – is permeated by performance stories. This

culture steers athletes towards the kinds of experiences and identity recounted in Christiana's stories. Kandy's stories show that an alternative exists.

Closing Thoughts

We hope that the analysis we have offered shows how the stories individuals tell of their lives make a difference later in life. In short, stories matter. Although in performance terms *both* Christiana and Kandy were highly successful golfers, the stories they told, the identities they developed, and their career cessation experiences differ dramatically. The very existence of these stories shows that alternative routes to and through success in elite sport are possible: it is simply *not* the case that there is only one way to achieve success and that withdrawal will inevitably be experienced as loss. Additionally, Christiana and Kandy's stories highlight the ways in which identity and experience are co-constructed through an interaction of psychological and socio-cultural factors. In this light, any attempt to understand (or, for that matter, influence) either woman's experience or sense of self *without* attending to social processes which operate within sport culture will be futile.

The life histories of these two women imply that it is not the case that at any time in life we can simply switch to a 'new' story when the one we have been telling fails. Instead, stories are developed over time with specific purposes in mind. Kandy was able to story retirement as an exciting opportunity (e.g., "I love gardening. I'll have a big garden") because this was a story (and self) that she had created and confirmed over a period of several years. In contrast, within Christiana's monological stories there was little room for excitement or opportunity through any activity other than winning a golf tournament. Thus, Christiana could not suddenly enjoy gardening ("digging potatoes up") – not because it is impossible to enjoy gardening, but rather because this would be a self too removed from the one she had created.

From this perspective, narrative and identity 'work' can be understood as a necessary and ongoing life project which is affected by the kinds of stories which are available within the individual's socio-cultural environment. It is therefore significant that the words of other

characters in Christiana and Kandy's stories – including parents, fans, sportspeople on television – invariably conformed to the contours of the performance narrative. As we have shown, continued exposure to this monological narrative interacted with not only the creation of their personal stories but also with both women's psychological and emotional well-being. Given that *our* stories shape *others'* identities and experiences, we believe that there is a collective need for those of us who work in sport and exercise to take seriously – and critically reflect upon – the stories we tell and endorse.

Christiana and Kandy's stories call for the dominance of the monological performance narrative to be redressed. This can only be achieved by making available in sport environments a range of story options which offer dialogical potential by storying diverse roles, activities, and ways of being. The first step is making room for – and valuing – alternative stories that may not align with one's own sport/life model. This study, alongside our previous research (Douglas & Carless, 2006, in press), draws attention to the existence of alternative, transgressive stories among successful sportspeople. At present, these stories seldom gain affirmation in sport. Instead the teller is more likely to be ridiculed, silenced, or 'encouraged' to change their story (for example, to tell a competitive performance story on the basis that this is 'natural' and 'necessary for success'). For many people in sport, a multiple major tournament winner who stories performance and competition as secondary to discovery and relationships seems a hard pill to swallow.

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